



Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander

Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander: 'Make Yourself the Best of What You Are'

by Victoria McAfee

"I knew well that the only way I could get that door open was to knock it down; because I knocked down all of them."

Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander's accomplishments opened doors for black women in the legal profession while she also fought for equality for all African-Americans. She was the first black woman to receive a doctorate in economics and to graduate from the University of Pennsylvania Law School. Her faith came from her religious heritage, and she pushed the African-American church to allow women to participate fully in the work of the Kingdom.

Sadie was born January 2, 1898, in Philadelphia to Mary Mossell. Shortly after Sadie's birth her grandfather, Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner, came to baptize the baby. Sadly, by the time she celebrated her first birthday, her parents separated. Sadie never knew her father Aaron Mossell, the first black man to graduate from the Law School of the University of Pennsylvania in 1888.

Mary's sister convinced Mary to move to Washington, D.C., so that she and husband Howard Moore, dean of Howard University, could help care for Sadie and her siblings. Mary often visited her parents in Philadelphia, where Sadie met distinguished leaders in the African-American church and came to know her famous, well-educated family. Bishop Benjamin Tucker Tanner was editor of the *Christian Recorder* and the *AME Church Review*; one of her uncles, Dr. Nathan F. Mossell, was a surgeon and founder of the Frederick Douglass Hospital; and another uncle was Henry Ossawa Tanner, a famous painter. Her aunt, Dr. Hallie Tanner Johnson, was the first black woman to pass the Alabama medical exam and started the Tuskegee Institute's Nurses' School and Hospital.

Because Mary and the children traveled back and forth so often, Sadie struggled academically in grade school because of inconsistent attendance. When she finished high school in Washington, Howard University awarded her a scholarship, but her mother said no. She enrolled Sadie instead in the University of Pennsylvania. Sadie graduated from the University's School of Education in 1918 with honors in spite of the white students who never even looked in her direction and places of business that refused to serve her. She prayed every night for strength and credited her faith for getting her through: "God, give me the strength to do my assignments the very best I have the ability. And Dear Lord, teach me to walk alone and not be lonely, knowing Thou art at my side."

She then went on to start her graduate education in economics and earned her doctorate in 1921. She was the second African-American woman in the United States to earn a Ph.D.

Sadly, no insurance company would hire her, although her grades and achievements were impeccable. Eventually, North Carolina Mutual Life, a black-owned

company, appointed her as assistant actuary.

After two years in North Carolina, Sadie married her college sweetheart, Raymond Alexander, who had just graduated from Harvard Law School. She went back to the University of Pennsylvania to their Law School and earned a degree in 1927, the first black woman to graduate from the university's law school. Her husband hired her as a partner in his law firm, and the two helped found the National Bar Association (NBA) for black attorneys. They were one of America's first husband-wife law partners until he became a judge in 1959.

Sadie started practicing law in Orphans Court, then worked uncontested divorce cases. She never turned anyone away, even the clients unable to pay. But her greatest struggle was juggling her family responsibilities and her law career. She remained ill for long periods after the birth of her children. She lost her first two children before they turned six months old, but two other daughters lived.

Sadie earned a reputation as a tough negotiator in Orphans Court, and soon she brought other clients to the law firm, especially the AME Church. She handled its real estate and tax business, but more than that, she argued for the church to recognize women's abilities: "Women are leaders in the world—race rises no higher than its women," she said. She wanted churches to elect "strong, capable, intelligent women" to church offices, and as the first female attorney for the AME Council of Bishops she pushed the group to involve more lay women and men in church business. She was in great demand as a speaker at church women's conferences, though her work and home duties forced her to decline many invitations. One leader wrote in her invitation, "Mrs. Sadie Alexander... has a contribution to make to the Christian woman of America which no other person can make."

She and Raymond supported organizations to empower African-Americans such as the National Urban League, which in 1948 in a comic book of Negro Heroes for children called her "Woman of the Year." The two helped write a Pennsylvania law to ban discrimination in hotels, theaters, and restaurants, and they spent several nights in jail in Philadelphia when business owners refused to obey the law and had them arrested. Their civil rights work gained the attention of President Harry S. Truman, who appointed Sadie to his new Civil Rights Commission that pushed to end segregation in the armed forces. Ironically, when she flew to Washington on business and was changing planes, she was denied a glass of milk at the airport's lunch counter, and that eventually led to a government ban on discrimination at airports.

Sadie's time in public service ended at age 83 with President Jimmy Carter appointing her chairperson of his White House Conference on Aging in 1978. She continued practicing law until she was 85 and began to suffer from Alzheimer's. She eventually died of pneumonia on November 1, 1989, at the age of 91. In one of her last interviews, she urged young black men and women, "Don't let anything stop you. There will be times when you'll be disappointed, but you can't stop. Make yourself the best that you can make out of what you are. The very best."



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